

First Words

A First Steps Communications Tool for Families From Family to Family

TRANSITION TO LIFE AFTER FIRST STEPS

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Alphabet Soup

Each month we will cover a few acronyms parents might hear while in First Steps. Sometimes it is awkward for families to ask. Here are some you might hear during transition:

- LRE=Least Restrictive Environment

A provision in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that gives children the right to be educated to the maximum extent appropriate in classrooms with their non-disabled peers.

- FAPE=Free Appropriate Public Education

The requirement in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act which gives children the right to individualized special education services at public expense, at no cost to the parent

Transitions in life often make us feel scared and uncertain. After all, transition means change, and we never know what change will bring. When your child is nearing his/her third birthday, transition out of First Steps and into other programs or services will be a big focus in your life. First Steps continuously works to make transitions for families as smooth as possible, thus easing those pangs of anxiety we all feel.

Your service coordinator will regularly encourage you to think about your child's future even though he/she may only be a year or two old. When your child is 18 months, the transition process officially begins. At the 18 month birthday, your Service Coordinator will request written consent to send some very general information about your child to your local school system. If you approve, your child's name, birth date and area of concern (suspected disability area) will be sent to school officials. This information is used for future planning purposes as schools evaluate potential classroom needs for the following school year.

Transition planning steps up around a child's 30 month birthday. At this time, with parental consent, information is again sent to the local school system to alert them to the potential need for services in six months. A transition conference will be scheduled between 90 and 180 days prior

to your child's third birthday. This meeting should involve your First Steps team, as well as representatives from the school system, Head Start, and other community programs that you might want to consider. A plan will be developed at this meeting to help you explore your options and gather information from potential programs in order to begin making some decisions about the future. During these last few months with First Steps, parents are encouraged to look at all options—special education preschool services, Head Start, community preschools, and other early childhood programs in the community. Visiting classrooms and talking with teachers will help you learn more about the program and methods used in teaching. Be sure to ask lots of questions until you feel comfortable selecting a program for your child.

If you are considering special education services, the school will ask you to sign a consent for evaluation. Within 60 school days after you sign that consent, an education evaluation will be conducted to measure your child's skills in several developmental/educational areas. When the evaluations are complete, a case conference will be scheduled to determine eligibility and to write an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if applicable. You can prepare

for that meeting by becoming familiar with your rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), specifically Article 7, which is Indiana's Special Education Regulations. For instance, know that you can invite whomever you choose to your child's IEP meeting. Consider inviting your First Steps team members, another experienced parent, or even an advocate who can help you learn how to navigate this new system. Once the IEP is developed, you are not required to sign it at the meeting. It's a big decision; you may take it home and read through it a few times, then ask any follow-up questions before you sign it.

There are many resources you can investigate about transition, some of which you will find in this newsletter. Additionally, your First Steps Service Coordinator will be a good resource, as well as your Family to Family Regional Facilitator or Point of Contact. See the Family to Family map on the First Steps website to find out how to contact your Regional Facilitator. By seeking out information, resources and support, you can ease some of the natural anxiety we all experience as we help our children move on to the next step in their early development and education.

What To Do When You Have Concerns About First Steps

We expect your experience in the First Steps system will be a positive one with excellent services and communication from your entire team. However, there may be times when you have concerns that arise about First Steps that need to be resolved. You could be concerned about the amount of service your child is receiving, the professionals providing the service, your child's eligibility or even how records about your child are kept. Whatever the concern, the sooner the problem is addressed, generally the better the outcome.

The best place to start when you have a concern is with your service coordinator. Your service coordinator is your link to all the services your child receives and can communicate with all participating parties. Be honest, direct and specific about the concern and what you would like to see instead. If your concern is your service coordinator, then you will want to talk with the intake coordinator at the System Point of Entry (SPOE). You may also

talk with the SPOE supervisor. The SPOE staff will be able to help you search the provider matrix for a better match for you and your child.

Another option is to contact the coordinator of your Local Planning and Coordinating Council (your county First Steps Council). Names and phone numbers of these individuals in your county may be found on the First Steps website under "how to contact us." The next step could be to contact the Bureau of Child Development and ask to speak to a First Steps Consultant.

If you are unable to resolve your concerns, you may need to express them in a more formal way. Ask your service coordinator for a copy of *A Family's Guide Through Procedural Safeguards*, which outlines the procedures for filing a complaint and provides sample letters. You can file a complaint in writing and send it to the Complaint Coordinator for the First Steps Early Intervention System. Formal complaints are investigated by the Bureau of Child Development staff and responded to within 60

calendar days.

If you disagree with the identification, evaluation or placement of your child, you may request mediation, where a mediator listens to both sides and helps to develop an agreement which suits all parties involved. Mediation is not a binding agreement. You may also request an impartial hearing where a hearing officer listens to both sides of the issue and renders a decision. This is a binding agreement. For issues of identification, evaluation and placement, mediation and an impartial hearing may be requested at the same time.

Very few formal complaints are filed each year in the First Steps system, as most concerns can be resolved at the local level with the procedures outlined above. Formal complaints are reported each year in the First Steps Annual Report. Procedural safeguards are in place for a reason, and families should understand how to use them when appropriate.

Advocacy Tip of the Month

If your child may be eligible for special education services, you will feel more confident in your case conference meetings if you are familiar with the rules that govern special education. One good way to begin learning is to contact the Indiana Department of Education's Division of Exceptional Learners to request a copy of Indiana's special education regulations, called Article 7, as well as the Live, Learn, Work and Play companion guide. You can also attend a training about Article 7 before your conference. Contact InSource at 800-332-4433 or the Indiana Parent Information Network at 317-257-8683 to ask about the time and date of their next family training.

Resources for Families and Providers

Check out these web resources on transition:

Transition to Early Childhood Special Education: A Guide for Parents of Children with Disabilities
http://www.in.gov/fssa/first_step/trans/earlychild.html

Early Childhood Transition Resources on Family Involvement (links from the Indiana Transition Initiative)
http://www.in.gov/fssa/first_step/trans/resources.html

IDEA Requirements for Preschoolers with Disabilities
<http://www.ideapractices.org/resources/files/PreschoolersPolicy&PracticeGuide.pdf>

National Early Childhood Transition and Training Center
<http://www.ihdi.uky.edu/nectc/>

Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion Briefs
http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECRII/ECRII_Resources_for_You_to_Use/ECRII_Briefs/ecrii_briefs.html